

Sunday 5th March 2023, 9.30am at Newnham (joint service)

Genesis 12:1-4a and John 3:1-17

At the turn of the millennium, Sam and I were living in Hemingford Grey, a pretty village on the river not far from here. We had been married for three or four years, we had a wonderful church community, lots of friends and a beautiful little boy and a baby on the way. The only tricky thing in life, really, was Sam's work. A new boss had changed the dynamic of the place, a place that Sam had loved working in, and he had been looking at other jobs. But none had come to anything and so, with the baby on the way, we felt it was best he stopped applying for jobs for a while. But then we saw THE job, a big step up, in terms of responsibility but also salary, but pretty much sounding like it had been written for Sam. The timing was not so good but he applied. In the meantime in our bible study that we did with good friends, we were reading of Nehemiah rebuilding the walls. To cut a long story short, Sam got the job and the Nehemiah story became a very significant element of us believing we should be on the move – despite loving where we were, and a baby due imminently, i.e. two weeks before Sam started the job! The job was in Surrey and this was a big move to a new place where we knew no-one. We left everything we had known together to start a new life, and we firmly believe that God called us there. Not because we heard an audible voice from heaven, but because there were enough nudges and affirmations, and Nehemiah! Some of you have heard the story in more detail when Sam did a Friday talk three years ago. Do ask him about it! And this chimes with what Professor John Goldingay says when he writes about the Old Testament reading we just heard – read marked part of page 133

So lets look at the verses from Genesis chapter 12 – for me they raise lots of questions that have no clear answers but the verses are also really inspiring and exciting. It is also wonderfully understated. 'Now the Lord said to Abram, 'go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.'"

It is easy to imagine with a character like Abram, or some of the other Old Testament greats, that God was constantly clearly talking to them, that they were somehow tuned in to the voice of God and that it was easier in those days than it is for us, and maybe that is the case, but I read something this

week that I hadn't noticed before. Genesis refers to God speaking to Abraham only about once every twenty five years, and Abraham goes through a number of crises without there being any reference to God's speaking to him in the midst of them. And its not just Abraham, I have been following the story of Joseph in evening prayer for the last days which comes up later in Genesis and spans many chapters, but I was reminded that God is mentioned pretty rarely in that account, it is only when we look back through the stories that we see God at work, God's guidance and presence with them even when he was quiet.

But today's passage from Genesis 12 appears to be God clearly telling Abraham to go, to leave everything he knew, the place he was settled in and to go, to go, as God says, 'to the land that I will show you'. Now **we** know that was Canaan, but did Abraham? Did he know that the destination was to be Canaan? Well maybe or maybe not until he got there. He wasn't in a position as we are, to sit down and book his flight, or even to jump in the car and set the sat nav. He and his family would, presumably, have walked, maybe with the assistance of an animal. He set out from Haran and he stopped in Canaan – about a four hundred mile journey. From what is now southern turkey, to what we know as Palestine. How did he know where he was going, did he just start out and trust that God would guide his way.

This is a tale of God calling a seventy five year old man to take his family, by foot, on a four hundred mile journey - roughly like one of us walking to St Andrews in Scotland. What do you think Richard? – to the vaguely promised 'land that I will show you'. This raises questions for me.

Like, Why? It doesn't really make sense. Surely God could have used someone already in or near Canaan, perhaps someone younger with a wife who could bear children, if the intention was for this person to become father of his people. It makes no sense. And why Canaan? Who knows.

But as we flick through the pages of scripture, we are reminded repeatedly that God is not especially inclined to do things the obvious, sensible or easy way. He seems always to use the 'wrong' or at least surprising people, places and events. I haven't referred to the reading from John's gospel today – another great story – but one line is rather fitting I think. Jesus says to Nicodemus 'the wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of

it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes'. That seems to be the way God has always been at work in his people – surprising people and places, not the obvious, not what makes sense to us humans.

So what about us? As I said this passage leaves me with lots of questions. How do we hear the call of God? Are we ready to be surprised and open to the ridiculous? What are the things we think are barriers? Do we trust that God will show us the way as well as the destination?

Maybe we should consider these. And in doing so I offer you a little of my own experience but recognising that there are different answers.

How do we hear the call of God? The million dollar question. My own experience has been in inner 'gut' feelings of being nudged or tugged in a new direction, bible verses that take on a new resonance, other people saying or suggesting things often out of the blue, something catching my eye and then not going away. I felt a strong sense of call to come here, to this role and in many ways it made no sense, the timing was wrong, I was about to start a massive and long planned building project at one of my churches, our daughter was doing GCSEs etc etc. But once I had seen the advert, a seed was planted, it wouldn't go away, I kept thinking about it, and at each point when we tentatively pushed the door, it was flung wide open – and here we are. In the bible we see people hearing from God in all sorts of ways - through the actions of other people, in a burning bush, an earthquake, a cloud, the still small voice, the visit of a messenger. I guess my only comment is that for me it is usually a niggle that won't go away. How do we hear the call of God?

Another question, are we ready to be surprised and open to the ridiculous? Think about Noah, people must have thought him mad – building this huge boat when there was not a hint of a flood or rain. The first disciples, leaving their family business to follow Jesus. Abram and Sarai, older and without an heir. There are always things we can use as an excuse and a barrier, but God doesn't seem to be worried about the surprising or ridiculous. A few years ago I read this on the internet - Noah was a drunk, Abraham was too old, Isaac was a daydreamer, Jacob was a liar, Joseph was abused, Moses had a stutter, Gideon was afraid, Samson had long hair and was a womanizer, Rahab was a prostitute, Jeremiah and Timothy were too young, David was

an adulterer and a murderer, Elijah was suicidal, Isaiah preached naked, Jonah ran from God, Naomi was a widow, Job went bankrupt, Peter denied Christ, The disciples fell asleep while praying, Martha worried about everything, The Samaritan woman was divorced (more than once), Zaccheus was too small, Paul was too religious and Lazarus was dead! What are the things we think are barriers?

Do we trust that God will show us the way as well as the destination? None of us know where life will take us, not really. We might think we have arrived, or we are settled but life can be complicated, it can throw all sorts of things into our path and so we have to trust, as Abraham had to, that God is with us on the journey. One of the things I find really interesting about this story of Abraham, is that it is part of a bigger narrative. His father had already upped and left Ur with his family some years before. The verses just before those we heard today tells us of Abrams father and the family setting out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan. But at that time they didn't make it to Canaan, for some reason they settled in Haran, which wasn't even on the way. I think I've learned not to be too worried about the next destination, I just need to learn to trust that God is on the journey and that, when I need to, I will hear his voice.

And so as I come to a close, I want us to sit with some of the questions, and consider them for ourselves. Is God calling me to something new? How will I hear from him? Am I open to that being ridiculous, or meaning I have to give up something precious? It might be a big call, or a small, it might seem utterly undoable and there may be many reasons I could come up with to say no, but it might just be the thing that God wants, that the world or others need, that leaves a legacy. And can we find ourselves able to trust that God will be there on the journey even when he remains silent? Amen